SITUATING HELEN FRANKENTHALER'S *WIZARD*

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The following faculty members served as the supervisory committee chair and members for the thesis of Louise Byrne Cranny.

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ABSTRACT

Completed in 1963, Helen Frankenthaler's *Wizard* stands apart from her then contemporary paintings, with its vertical orientation, body-sized scale, and figural allusion in both name and form. One of the last paintings Frankenthaler worked entirely in oil, *Wizard* should be understood as a crucial experiment in both method and medium, presaging key changes in Frankenthaler's established approach. The artist's works of 1962 show the last influences of didactic expressionism, where apparently unguided drips and blots of oil punctuate wide expanses of unprimed canvas, each piece emerging as an autonomous work. Between 1963-1964, however, Frankenthaler began to work serially, using acrylic rather than oil. At the same time, her work turned more profoundly interior, with enveloping swathes of paint containing centered but still abstracted images. With its recognizable, centrally placed figural form, its flooded surface, and its dense layering of paint, *Wizard* makes visible a pull between spontaneity and intent. The tensions of *Wizard* signal a change of direction for Frankenthaler. Where her works from 1962 clearly privileged flatness—the canvas of equal import with the paint—in *Wizard* and related works, a new and more conflicted relationship between form and material emerged.

Dedicated to Tim and Sam Cranny, and to learning new things.

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INTRODUCTION

Helen Frankenthaler's *Wizard* (1963) stands apart from her then contemporary paintings, with its vertical orientation, body-sized scale, and allusion to the figural in both name and form. *Wizard* can be measured in inches (70 x 40), whilst most of Frankenthaler's works measured around seven to eight feet at the time. The oil with which it is painted has been thinned to transparency with turpentine, yet *Wizard*'s shades retain a boldness and strength, particularly in the top two-thirds of the work. Comprised of bright orange and contrasting yellow washes, a vibrant red center, deep brown anchor, and various interlocking green stains, the painting suggests an organic structure within an amorphous whole. A bounded entity resides in the painting's center, proportioned to human size, yet clearly not of human shape. This entity is abstracted to such a point that form may be recognized but function is left to conjecture.

Wizard was painted in the summer of 1963, in a boathouse used to prepare canvas sails.[1] There are clearly apparent vertical lines throughout the painting. These lines are from the floorboards on which Frankenthaler laid her canvas. They establish that *Wizard* was painted directly on the floor, with Frankenthaler working from above to guide the thinned oil. With *Wizard* and related paintings from that summer, Frankenthaler used an

[1] According to the recollections of Andre Emmerich, in the summer of 1963, Frankenthaler rented her own studio, a former fisherman's loft that had previously been used for making, repairing, and drying boat sails. Emmerich, Andre. "Recollections: Greenberg & Frankenthaler." *The New Criterion*, (December 2004), 29-31.

intensity of hue she had not previously attempted in such large swathes of paint, involving repeated washes of bright color. When it came to displaying the works, Frankenthaler made the decision to flip the canvases so that each work would be viewed on the reverse, unpainted side. With this move, the role of unprimed cotton duck became especially key, as the quantity of paint wash on the original side soaked through to present still deep color on the reverse. The colors themselves lost some of their intense brightness, and appear more subdued on the viewing side.

Perhaps Frankenthaler was not yet ready for the density of hue that came from using oil as the medium for these strong colors. Indeed it appears that *Wizard* may have been the last work Frankenthaler painted entirely in oil. After *Gulfstream* (1963) and *New Brunswick* (1963), both painted in oil and acrylic, Frankenthaler's later paintings were solely in acrylic, as were her many prints. *Wizard* thus holds a particular place in the development of the artist, who seems after to have found thinned acrylic more suitable to the works she was developing.[2]

This thesis highlights the significance of *Wizard* in the development of Helen Frankenthaler's art. In method and medium as well as form and content, *Wizard* partakes of an experiment with series that was new in Frankenthaler's œuvre. It reflects key changes that were to be repeated in a number of Frankenthaler's best-known works from the following two years. The artist's works of 1962 show the last influences of didactic expressionism, where apparently unguided drips and blots of oil punctuate wide expanses of unprimed canvas. Between 1963-1964, Frankenthaler began to work serially, using

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[2] *The Maud* (1963), New York, Coll. of Dr. and Mrs. Robert D. Seely, is also listed as being painted with oil. I have been unable to find an image of this work and am unsure if it follows the new enveloping style from 1963.

acrylic rather than oil. At the same time, she became interested in the idea of enveloping abstracted central images and her work became more profoundly interior. In addition to *Wizard*, these works include, *The Bay* (1963), *Small's Paradise* (1964), *Interior Landscape* (1964), and *Buddha's Court* (1964). In these paintings, a square—or in the case of *Wizard*, rectangular—shape encloses a more amorphous form. Where works like *Arcadia* (1962) clearly privileged flatness—the canvas of equal import with the paint—in *Wizard* and related works, a new and less clear relationship between form and material emerged.

METHOD AND MEDIUM

Wizard was one of a number of paintings made by Frankenthaler in the summer of 1963. The series that *Wizard* foreshadowed was prepared for an exhibition at Andre Emmerich's gallery in late 1963, called *Helen Frankenthaler: New Works*. Since her marriage to Robert Motherwell in 1959, the two artists had summered in Provincetown, Massachusetts. There, Motherwell had a studio in an old sail-making building. Motherwell would work on the top of the two stories while Frankenthaler used the ground floor.

A photograph of the couple from the early 1960s demonstrates the more relaxed approach Provincetown offered compared with the social and artistic whirl of Manhattan where they lived on East 94th street.[3] This was Motherwell's second marriage and Frankenthaler's first. They shared an age difference of thirteen years; she twenty-nine and he forty-two at the time of their wedding in 1958. He was by far the more established artist at the time, having been involved with first-wave Abstract Expressionism since the 1940s. She had already had a five-year relationship with critic Clement Greenberg, and was recognized within New York art circles for her breakthrough work *Mountains and*

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[3] "Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell at their Provincetown studio, ca. 1960," Archives of American Art, accessed May 11, 2012, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/images/detail/helen-frankenthaler-and-robert-motherwell-their-provincetown-studio-9422

Sea (1952) and her technique of thinning oil with turpentine before guiding the mixture across unprimed canvas.

Despite Motherwell's established and acknowledged position as a powerful first-wave abstract expressionist, he appears both bemused and uncomfortable in the early 1960s photograph. Frankenthaler, on the other hand, is relaxed and confident, happy to strike a pose that may well have been choreographed by the unknown photographer. Her outgoing approach is as apparent from this photo as is her husband's more introverted nature. Ann Freedman, the former president of *Knoedler and company*, remembered that: "Helen loved to entertain. She enjoyed feeding people and engaging in lively conversation. And she liked to dance. In fact, you could see it in her movements as she worked on her paintings."[4] This gregarious nature is also on view here as Frankenthaler smiles comfortably for the camera, relaxed in her place in what was once her husband's studio, now one they share. It was this natural confidence that was to serve her so well in the maelstrom of the New York art world.

As one of the last paintings Frankenthaler worked entirely in oil, *Wizard* should be understood as a crucial experiment in both method and medium, presaging key changes in Frankenthaler's established approach. *Wizard* is genuinely flooded with thinned oil paint, beginning with the old blood red of the background that proceeds past the stretched edges of the canvas. The head of the figure is separated from the body by a wash of yellow that sweeps across the center of the shape. The yellow seeps into the organs below, and rises into the shape above. Another bold red form stains the inside of

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[4] Grace Gluek. "Helen Frankenthaler, Abstract Painter Who Shaped a Movement, Dies at 83," *New York Times*, New York, December 27, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/28/arts/helen-frankenthaler-abstract-painter-dies-at-83.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

the head, surrounded by an organic halo of tinted white. It is a substantial head to rest upon such a body, but it does not give the sensation of weight. Rather, the entity projects stability and serenity through its substance, which is astonishing considering the ethereal nature of the medium and presentation. The base of the painting is stained in a sandy beige/yellow, steeped expansively from the deep brown base chosen by the artist on the original side of the work. This lighter color adds a more positive energy to the painting, suggesting the figure is floating but tethered at the same time. This clear, if abstracted, content is a further departure point for the artist, and an example not repeated in any other work.

By contrast, *Arcadia* (1962) is one of the clearest examples of the work Frankenthaler was undertaking at the beginning of the 1960s. During this time, she completed a number of works that consisted of large expanses of raw canvas with organic shapes and blots in the center, often likened to Rorschach-like marks. These works are indisputably flat, as the paint soaked canvas threads are of the same import as the untouched threads in the raw expanse of cotton duck. In *Arcadia*, an organic, almost anatomical shape is comprised of a number of smaller stains. It is situated toward—but not overtly centered on—the middle of the canvas. Turpentine halos emerge from the elongated pools of blue and green thinned oil. The surrounding canvas is left untouched save for a pale blue soak of paint to the right of the central form. Frankenthaler signed the work in the turpentine stain that leaked from this pale blue, towards the lower right of the canvas but still a central part of the work. A small cross of two black lines and a base of earthy red center the work and link the main content to the painting's base.

With its fluid integration of form and material, *Arcadia* represents the kind of painting Frankenthaler herself most claimed to respect:

> A really good picture looks as if it's happened at once. It's an immediate image. For my own work, when a picture looks labored and overworked, and you can read in it – well, she did this and then she did that, and then she did that – there is something in it that has not got to do with beautiful art to me. And I usually throw these out, though I think very often it takes ten of those over-labored efforts to produce one really beautiful wrist motion that is synchronized with your head and heart, and you have it, and therefore it looks as if it were born in a minute.[5]

Frankenthaler repeated this belief throughout her career, expressing publicly that her art was about the instinctive moment of drawing with paint.

Yet Frankenthaler's paintings from 1963 belie this sentiment. The painted side of *Wizard* does not look as if it were born in a minute. Layers of paint are clearly visible, particularly across the upper third of the painting where both the overworking and the bright red and yellow paints have been obviously built up over several washes.[6] The green section immediately below appears to sit above another color and the pristine white paint to its immediate left seems to be covering something as it splashes slightly onto the deepest red core of the painting.

Wizard suggests a living organic entity within the flatness of the painting. This tension between form and material is amplified through Frankenthaler's decision to flip the work. When considering this decision, it is worth noting that Frankenthaler had also been experimenting with lithographs in the previous few years. The process of lithography is one where the drawing—in crayon or other medium—is revealed as a

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[5] Barbara Rose, *Frankenthaler*. (New York, New Haven Press, 1972), 85.

[6] Building texture into a painting remained an anathema to Frankenthaler despite some experimentation during the 1950s. The minor dots of white paint visible on *Wizard's* display side appear to have adhered to the canvas as Frankenthaler painted the reverse, and they remain, with the painted-over section at the top right corner, definite signs of texture on this side of the work.

mirror image in the final product. Frankenthaler's lithographs from 1962 demonstrated this process, and she spoke positively about the process of leaving one's mark without knowing the final result before the process was completed, a further argument for her self-professed instinctive approach to mark making.[7] Her early work in this area, including *Postcard for James Schuyler* (1962), began to hint at the sweeping U shape and painted base of her 1963 paintings. It is also interesting to note the brightness of the red and orange dots in the smaller marks of this print, colors with the intensity of hue that would appear on the painted side of *Wizard* in considerably greater volume.

Speaking of Frankenthaler's decision to flip the paintings for the 1963 show, Emmerich claimed the artist felt the colors were too bright on the original side of the works and turned them over to "soften the impact of the works."[8] Barbara Rose, for her part, has suggested that Frankenthaler chose to flip these paintings to reclaim the muddy, hazy, and transparent mists for which she was then recognized.[9] Emmerich's views can be credited with more weight here if these paintings were indeed prepared for his exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler: New Works* in late 1963. But other factors may have influenced the decision to flip her canvases from this period of production, as her level of experimentation at this time suggests that she had no hesitation in changing direction as her artistic method evolved. In these 1963 works, Frankenthaler's focus is profoundly more inward than before, with enveloping swathes of paint containing centered but still abstracted images. The myth is celebrated within rather than without. A pull between

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[7] Helen Frankenthaler. *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959*. (New York, Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 24.

[8] Andre Emmerich. "Recollections: Greenberg and Frankenthaler." *New Criterion* 23 (December 2004): 30.

[9] Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 11.

spontaneity and intent rises to the fore here, in contrast with earlier works.

The envelopment in composition and color can be seen clearly through *Sands* (1964), as well as *Small's Paradise* (1964) and *Buddha's Court* (1964), two of her better-known works from this time. But it is the development of flipping the final composition, intrinsic to lithography but extremely unusual for painting, that is of particular interest. In lithography, the image is reversed as part of the artistic process; the reverse result is expected and accepted. Turning a painting in order to display the reverse of the canvas as the finished work was a highly unusual step, and makes *Wizard*, and the other paintings of summer 1963, a strong example of her willingness to take risks as an artist.

The genesis of this idea, however, may not have been as innovative as it first sounds. Frankenthaler must have been aware of her then-husband Robert Motherwell's 1962 experience:

> The story that he often told is that while working in his studio one day, he was struck by the back of a c. 1961 painting, *Summertime in Italy*, leaning against a larger, unfinished canvas with a mono-chromatic yellow ochre surface. After becoming aware of the shape defined by the smaller work, he used charcoal to outline its dimensions on the surface of the larger one. The resulting configuration resembled an opening at the bottom of the canvas. Since this rectangular break in the ochre field could be construed as a doorway, Motherwell puzzled over the painting; both excited by its suggestion of an opening and troubled by its closure. Several months later, he reversed the canvas by turning it upside down, thereby transforming the door into a window, which is suspended from the top of the picture. This change released the background from its strict ties to the picture plane, permitting a new reciprocity between it and the rectangle inscribed within its parameters, leaving viewers in doubt as to whether the window, the ensuing colored field, or perhaps both were hovering in a relatively shallow space. Motherwell recognized this indeterminate depth as an essentially new and exciting component in his work: it differed from his usual practice, beginning in the 1940s, of creating resolutely flat paintings, resembling walls, superimposed with abstract collage-like elements, punctured occasionally by prison bars, open coffins, and inaccessible windows (often placed in the upper-right corner of his ongoing *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*). He decided to celebrate his new approach by using the general word 'open' as the title for his new series, explaining: "In the Random House unabridged dictionary, there are eighty-two

> entries under the word 'open' that could be set on separate lines, as in a poem. For me those entries are most beautiful, filled with all kinds of associations, all kinds of images."[10]

Motherwell's experiences redefining the depth and orientation of his painting, and Frankenthaler's work with lithography, must have led to interesting discussions about intent and spontaneity during the early years of their marriage. Motherwell used the word "open" to describe his approach to his 1962 discovery. At the same moment, Frankenthaler was beginning to use the word "enclosure" to describe the process of work she was developing. Clearly they were intrigued by similar ideas as they headed to Provincetown for the summer of 1963. Where *Wizard*, *Gulfstream*, and other Frankenthaler works were showing abstract images cocooned within curves of stained canvas, Motherwell's charcoal outline of the smaller painting over the larger one represented an expansion, an opening. His approach to this new idea came through adding en element of depth to his work, one that he had assiduously avoided in his earlier career. Frankenthaler remained wedded to the flatness of her painting, which might be why her window-like framing with stained paint comes across as enveloping, pushing inward to support the central image of the piece rather than opening it outward to the viewer. Flipping the canvas here enhances that flatness, as the layers of paint needed to support the new intensity of color come dangerously close to suggesting depth on the side she originally painted.

This depth of paint and the obvious layering at the time of *Wizard*'s composition signals a fascinating transition. It is not one supported in interviews with or quotes by the

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[10] Robert Hobbs, "Motherwell's *Opens*: Heidegger, Mallarmé, and Zen." in *Robert Motherwell: Open,* ed. Matthew Collings et al., (London: 21 Publishing Ltd., 2009), 50.

artist. She preferred to focus on the natural spread of paint on canvas, be it oil or acrylic, as when explaining the lack of British interest in her work to academic Alison Rowley; "Well, there's not really that much interest in it here… even Hilton [Kramer] thinks painting has to look worked – worked over. A lightness, an openness, a few marks… it's the result of just as much work. It takes years."[11] Throughout her career, Frankenthaler continued to champion the guided impulse, denying the consciousness of a mark. *Wizard* belies this approach, and this suggests a transition point between the oil painting of previous years and the acrylic work that was to follow. Acrylic paint is easier to both thin and spread than oil, allowing a depth of color and saturation of paint to develop without repeated overlays. *Wizard* shows a precursor to this approach, demonstrating to Frankenthaler that oil paint could not maintain the necessary flatness as she turned to enveloping compositions.

There are clearly apparent vertical lines throughout *Wizard* from the floorboards on which Frankenthaler laid her canvas. These lines confirm that *Wizard* was painted directly on the floor, and that the canvas was rotated during the painting process. They also prevent the viewer from excluding the canvas as part of the work, of less importance than the colors and forms. The viewer cannot add another dimension to the flatness of the work as it is impossible to disengage the image from its home. There appears to be a clear subject in the painting, but there is neither background, nor foreground. The flatness is enhanced on the displayed side, in contrast to the muting effect that flipping the canvas had on the intensity of color in the work.

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[11] Alison Rowley, *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting History, Writing Painting*. (Northern Ireland: I.B Taurus, 2008), 128.

Frankenthaler had moved beyond her earliest influences by 1963, but she always acknowledged Jackson Pollock's profound effect on the beginning of her career.[12] Her interest in new ways of using paint on canvas flourished after Clement Greenberg took her first to Pollock's 1951 *Black and White* exhibition, and later to see Pollock at work on Long Island. She was fascinated by the way Pollock removed his canvas from the traditional easel setting, and by the freedom he generated using devices other than brushes to apply paint to canvas.[13] However, Frankenthaler did not like Pollock's drip technique, despite the extraordinary new method of expression she felt she was developing from exposure to his work.[14]

Frankenthaler considered Pollock's black and white oil paintings a key influence in her experiments with poured paint. In these works, Pollock was overtly experimenting with line, drawing with paint and with his wrist. Pollock found drawing to be a critical element of his early career and it reappeared in his black-and-white paintings with some possible figurative references.[15] Frankenthaler frequently stated that she was more interested in the process of drawing than painting. Her technique was to draw with paint, and use her hand, wrist, or entire body as the writing instrument.[16]

This technique can be clearly identified in *Wizard*. The deep red inverted U around the outer regions of *Wizard* has been guided by broad wrist strokes. These strokes create a river around the figure, which flows freely without threatening to overwhelm. An

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[12] John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997). See also E. A. Carmean Jr, *Helen Frankenthaler. A Paintings Retrospective* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1975), 30.

[13] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock. *Old Mistresses, Women, Art, and Ideology* (London: Pandora, 1981), 149.

[14] Barbara Rose. *Autocritique*. (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), 125.

[15] "Untitled Collage 1," The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, accessed February 8 2013. http://www.themodern.org/collection/untitled-collage-1/944

[16] Rose. *Autocritique.* 112.

exception to this appears above the head of the figure, on the viewer's right. Here, the initial green wash seems to have been painted over with red to match the rest of the background. The overworking feels forced and unnatural in comparison with the rest of the work.[17]

It is worth noting that Frankenthaler did not discard *Wizard* for having "failed" by not appearing to be of one process, one action of the wrist. Why did this painting remain in the portfolio of an artist who was open about throwing out pieces that did not work?[18] It may have simply appealed to Frankenthaler's well-known sense of wit and whimsy. It may have achieved the steady brightening of hue that she was beginning to find relevant at this time. It may be that the overworking is simply not as obvious on the original side of the painting. Or, it can be argued that this painting mattered to Frankenthaler. It mattered because it gave her something new with which to work. It represented "a bridge between oil and what was possible."[19] It is known that *Wizard* was Frankenthaler's only painting in thinned oil in this new style and as such is highly likely that the painting must have contributed to her decision to use acrylic paint from this summer on.[20]

Based on her previous assertions, Frankenthaler had two obvious reasons to

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[17] A photo of the back of the painting is available from the Utah Museum of Fine Arts for reference.

[18] "Oral History Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," Archives of American Art, accessed April 15, 2013, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-helen-frankenthaler-12171 This was not an uncommon approach for color field painters at the time. Kenneth Noland also followed this path, as noted in "Speech delivered at University of Hartford, March, 1988," Kenneth Noland: Context, http://www.sharecom.ca/noland/nolandtalk.html

[19] With apologies to Morris Louis for plagiarizing his famous 1953 quote upon seeing Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* that it was "a bridge between Pollock and what was possible."

[20] *The Maud* (1963) is also entirely in thinned oil and from that summer. I have not been able to find an image of this painting although at close to 8' x 6' it is clearly a more monumental size. *Gulfstream* (1963), a remarkably similar painting to *Wizard*, is in oil and acrylic as is *New Brunswick* (1963), which does not appear to have been painted on the studio floorboards and may have been painted later in the year in her New York studio.

discard this painting. The first is the recognizable content, referenced by the artist in a title that went against her abstractionist background. The second is the flaw of layered paint so clear on the upper right corner of the figure. That Frankenthaler chose to keep this work, and that it appears in Barbara Rose's 1975 book on Frankenthaler, indicates that the artist found something worth exploring. Added to this, the choice of oil paint here is revealing and compelling, and unique amongst this group of works.

Frankenthaler's switch from using oils to using acrylics during 1963 was an important development in her painting career, and opened the way to her next phase of print-making. The artist found that diluted oil stained the canvas, but using acrylic flooded areas of cloth more quickly and completely. Other works from 1963 and 1964 continue Frankenthaler's evolution of completely covering the canvas in paint, departing from her previous works.

Wizard emerged during a period in which Frankenthaler was tackling formal and conceptual problems in a serial manner. Previously, however, Frankenthaler's work had evolved piece by piece. She was well known to prefer each painting stand on its own merits. This approach went against the prevailing trend of the early 1960s expressionists who proclaimed that paintings needed to expand on a particular trademark or subject series to be considered disciplined.[21] E.A. Carmen Jr, then of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, quotes Frankenthaler discussing her work:

> When one gets within the work, into my career… one sees the paintings are not the same, in that each canvas is essentially its own breakthrough and development, not always the result of a serial theme and variation. One sees a

[21] Emmerich, 29.

basic signature that develops over the decades.[22]

Wizard demonstrates a quite dramatic diversion from this path, with an amorphous entity centering the painting, a clearly overworked portion of canvas in the upper right, and perhaps most significantly, with the artist's decision to display the reverse of the canvas's painted side. As one of the last paintings Frankenthaler ever worked entirely in oil, *Wizard* may be considered a seminal experiment in this process to see if oil paint would produce the result she was looking for that summer. The brightness of hue on the reverse (painted) side of the work suggests that Frankenthaler was looking to exchange her previous approach of washed-out, muddied color for some of the vibrancy of other early color field work. The layers of paint are challenging and an extraordinary volte-face from her previous work with painting and lithography. With *Wizard,* clear sections of reworking and over-painting stand out on the painted side of the canvas. The paint itself is of a much clearer hue than previous works and is layered; whether for intensity of color or to guide the development of content is open to debate. Nonetheless, the fact that issues including intensity of hue and intended composition can be debated in this work demonstrate how dramatic a change Frankenthaler undertook in her painting that summer.

[22] E.A. Carmean Jr, *Helen Frankenthaler. A Paintings Retrospective.* (New York, Harry N. Abrams Inc.,1975), 5.

FORM AND CONTENT

If *Wizard* were a continuation of Frankenthaler's previous approach to painting with oil, the painting would be an example of abstraction jockeying with material for equality on the canvas. *Mountains and Sea* (1953) had been the painting of most influence in her career up to that point. Her muted hued, soak-stain technique had informed the work of key color-field painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. Frankenthaler used thinned oil of a multicolored hue, developed as she mixed pots together to find colors that were not individual shades per se but muddied versions of leftover paint. Thinning this paint with turpentine, she removed any material boundary between the canvas and the paint that now soaked through it, unifying the composite into one resolutely compliant surface.

By 1963, Frankenthaler was ready to move beyond the halo stain produced by the oil paint of her earlier works, and the tendency of oil to fade on unprimed canvas.[23] *Wizard* was clearly a key piece during this evolution. The remarkably strong and bright greens, reds, and browns on the reverse side of the painting indicate that the artist had little fear of adding brighter colors to her work.

By now, Frankenthaler had figured out how to factor in never-ending floods of paint, which can be seen past the edges of *Wizard's* canvas. When it came to the corners

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[23] Rose, *Autocritique*, 130.

of her 1963-64 paintings, she describes: "using them or ignoring them, or pretending they're not corners… or painting as if the corners were miles beyond my reach or vision."[24] The reverse of the painting clearly shows how Frankenthaler painted well beyond the edges of the canvas, another clue suggesting the painting itself was cropped from a larger piece of cotton duck. The carefully centered abstract form within the painting adds weight to this argument. As previously discussed, Frankenthaler's earlier paintings avoided content so clearly aligned with the center of the canvas. This development seems to have followed her early work in print and lithography.

Numerous sources claim Frankenthaler changed to using acrylic paint in 1962. While this is true for her print work, the artist did not start painting with acrylic until later the following year.[25] *The Bay* is the first 1963 painting usually listed in chronologies of Frankenthaler's paintings and is one of her better-known works from that year. It is easy to view this work first as a kind of hybrid of Frankenthaler's old approach and the style that develops during this very interesting year. *The Bay* still comprises gentle washed colors, in this case blue, green, a band of grey, and a small moment of thinned red to the left of the painting's center. The colors themselves are more intense than works from the previous few years. Frankenthaler notes that the sienna red dot was the last color she added: "Then I looked at it and said to myself, stop, get out of here."[26]

An important change with *The Bay* involves just how much of the canvas is covered with paint. For apparently the first time, the artist has covered most of the canvas

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[24] "Oral History Interview," http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-helen-frankenthaler-12171

[25] The artist used acrylic paint for the prints she began working with from 1960, but continued using oil for her paintings until 1963.

[26] Carmean. *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective*. 12.

with large swathes of individual shades. Both the end-of-summer-grass green in the mid-section, and the band of grey at the bottom of the painting go from one edge of the canvas to the other. At 6 feet 8 ¾ inches x 6 feet 9 ¾ inches in size, this is a highly noticeable change. The upper third of the painting displays patches of unfilled canvas on both sides of the works. The blue center of the painting reminds one of water regardless of the title. It is as though deep blue ocean water has been poured around one foot from the top of the work, and very much in the center – previewing later compositional developments. This color has then spread vertically, down the painting and upward continuing past the top edge. One assumes this has occurred in a more organic way than the horizontal spread of paint. Although it does not reach either side of the work, the artist's hand can be clearly seen in the horizontal sweeps of blue, bands of different depth and small dots of color dancing like ocean spray to the right edge of the canvas.

Frankenthaler continued to work with oil at least partially into the summer of 1963. Why then is *The Bay* so often shown as the transition piece between what had passed and what was to come? *The Bay* is an uncomplicated transition piece in an immediate sense. Previous works had substantial amounts of canvas untouched, and parts of edges ignored as boundaries, with the center of the painting of prime importance, *The Bay* guides us gently to a middle ground where *some* edges are ignored as boundaries, and most of the canvas is covered with painted wash. This wash travels beyond the work's edges, and beyond the eye of the audience.[27]

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[27] *Jacob's Ladder* (1957) could also be said to take this approach. However, this painting is made up of so many small and separate instances of paint that it does not fit well with the huge amorphous forms Frankenthaler was beginning to work with in 1963.

The Bay is an easy-to-read painting where the title clearly refers to the central reference in the piece. But it is not the only work where Frankenthaler is using more and more of the unprimed canvas to absorb large sweeps of color. *Island Weather II* (1963) and *Canal* (1963) also follow this pattern, and both these works are acrylic on canvas. *Island Weather II* echoes *The Bay* with prominent placement of blues, including a stripe down the entire right side. *Canal* also uses a sea blue wash, but the center of the work is taken up with a pale yellowy-brown crowned with the muddy green-brown she used in *Seascape with Dunes*. As with previous Frankenthaler paintings, these large works evoke the remembered rather than the imagined.

The sheer quantity of these large acrylic-washed works, all from 1963, suggests that Frankenthaler was refining her use of acrylic with its easier-to-thin consistency. The decision to reverse the works for public viewing demonstrates that while she was becoming more comfortable with the medium, she was not yet willing to expand her color palette.[28]

The distinct entity in the center of *Wizard* challenges our previous understanding of the abstract in Frankenthaler's work. The first concern here is how perfectly the form is centered, a deviation from earlier works where unmeasured spills occurred without consideration of their contextual positioning on the canvas (see *Arcadia*, 1962 or *Swan Lake 1*, 1961).[29] Here, the presence is placed squarely and deliberately in the center of the

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[28] A notable exception here is *Gulfstream*. Painted in oil and acrylic, it is full of vivid color, even when flipped to the reverse side. It also contains a central image surrounded by u-shaped semi-ovals of color. The main difference with this work is that the title does not refer directly to the central image, and keeps the viewer in a more abstracted frame of reference.

[29] *Swan Lake 1* is a particularly interesting painting as Frankenthaler named it after the shapes of swans she saw in the unfilled areas of canvas after she had finished painting. In this regard, it was similar to her favorite *Number 14* of Pollock's 1951 black and white paintings in which she saw an image of a fox.

work, and immediately draws the viewer's eye as the subject of the work. This focus is only enhanced by the title of the work, clearly referencing the being in the middle of the painting. John Elderfield, in *After a "Breakthrough": On the 1950s Paintings of Helen Frankenthaler*, claims that in the late 1950s, Frankenthaler moved from "an art of accumulated and floating symbols" to "a large group of important subject pictures… which includes such masterpieces as *Eden* and *Mother Goose Melody*."[30] Whether these were subject-driven pictures is certainly debatable, as the works show no sign of paint being actively layered or directed to depict an image. Further, the image usually perceived as the mother goose reference is in the right-hand third of *Mother Goose Melody*. It can be searched out by the viewer but is in no way centered or dominant within the work itself.

This centering of the Wizard-invoking image brings into question whether the canvas was cropped after the image emerged in Frankenthaler's painting. The piece is smaller than Frankenthaler's usual works, and she was known to resist reducing the size of her canvases, even when her dealer, Andre Emmerich, tried to convince her that her work would sell better in Europe if it were sized for domestic walls.[31] Her other works from 1963 still speak to her preference for monumental painting. Here again, *Wizard* is the anomaly.

On the displayed side of the panting, the form does not appear to be intentional, merely the result of circumstance, which places it in a netherworld of intent and content

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These resemblances could be read after the works were completed. With *Wizard*, there are clear indications that the image was actively formed, in direct contradiction to the approach Frankenthaler purported to follow.

[30] Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 8-9.

[31] Emmerich, 29.

issues. It appears to be a happy accident, deliberately resolved, an accident that would have been instantly scrapped by a more dogmatic abstract artist. This perspective can be questioned when considering the reverse of the canvas where the paint was spread. Here the lines of paint are much clearer, and more obviously guided. The layering of oil wash suggests thought and planning, and the overworked section, top left on the reverse side, displays correction to define the central abstract shape. Like the back of a tapestry, the reverse of *Wizard* shows signs of both thought and effort to produce the amorphous namesake of the painting.

Frankenthaler claimed a straightforward view to naming her paintings, preferring to do so once the work was completed, or as an obvious title came to her: "I usually name them for a image that seems to come out of the pictures… I don't like sentimental titles… One names a picture in order to refer to it."[32] Regardless of the artist's claims, the names of many of her works from the early 1960s, *Arcadia*, *Wizard*, and *Interior Landscape* amongst them, allude to her interest in the primitive, or in Jungian concepts. Frankenthaler was clearly influenced by the Abstract Expressionists interest in mythology. This preoccupation of early New York School painters grew from links made between mythology and the unconscious in psychoanalytical literature popular at the time. Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1912) was retitled and republished in the United States as *Symbols of Transformation and Integration of Personality* in 1939. John Graham's *Systems and Dialectics of Art* had been published two years earlier. Both texts presented Jungian ideas to an art world ripe for this moment. Although Frankenthaler

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[32] Henry Geldzahler. "Interview with Helen Frankenthaler." *Art Forum* 4, no. 2, (October 1965): 36.

would have been a school child when these books were first published, their ideas still impacted the New York school into the early 1950s. She would have come across them at Bennington College and in her interactions with the members of the Eighth Street Artist's Club.[33]

In 1956, Frankenthaler completed *Venus and the Mirror*, a partially abstracted work inspired by Ruben's painting of Helen Fourment, *Venus at Her Toilet*.[34] The *ArtNews* exhibition review of February 1957 describes Frankenthaler's version as "The open, thoroughly achieved *Venus with a Mirror*: human or animal shapes, an image, a reflection, a mirror."[35] Whether these images were intentional when Frankenthaler made the painting is unclear, what is clear is that they can be easily read within the work. John Elderfield explains Frankenthaler's reference to mythology thus:

> In Frankenthaler's work we discover shapes that either confirm our experience of the world or reveal to us worlds the like of which we had not previously known. The world's anatomy is invoked in these pictures: the organic rhymes and relationships of its parts and the geometry and clarity of its whole. The very form of a picture like *Arcadia* recalls the Romanticist idea of a work of art as a living organic entity, like a tree.[36]

The central shape in *Wizard* both confirms our experience of the mythological and reveals to us a world unknown. The gentle mythological or unknowable form does not threaten the viewer and in that regard, the painting remains consistent with her early

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[33] Although Frankenthaler claimed that she and Greenberg never discussed each other's work during their five-year relationship, it is impossible to imagine discussions and interpretations of philosophy never took place between them.

[34] Judith Bernstock. "Classical Mythology in Twentieth-Century Art: An Overview of a Humanistic Approach," *Artibus et Historiae.* Vol. 14, No. 27 (1993): 162.

[35] James Schuyler and Simon Pettit, *Selected Art Writings*. (New York: Black Sparrow Press,1998), 191.

[36] Elderfield, 154.

1960s works. Whether one believes that *Wizard* depicts genuine content in the form of an unknown mythical being, or simply alludes to the possibility of netherworld matter, the painting continues the approach to reminisces and imaginings that Frankenthaler incorporated throughout her career. Content can be inferred, but it is never entirely clear whether or not it was implied. And in her choice of titles, Frankenthaler adds more to the debate.

Mythology provided a great reserve of subject matter for the early Abstract Expressionists with whom Frankenthaler interacted. World War II and the immediate post-War experiences of refugee artists also had a profound influence on the New York School. In rejecting direct representation, these artists laid claim to external truths, unseen by collective experience, and the intoxicating possibility of artist as shaman. Mythology and Primitivism were both seen as avenues for exploring individual experience. In 1945, Barnett Newman claimed: "We as artists can paradoxically reject the Grecian form—while we can accept Greek literature, which by its unequivocal preoccupation with tragedy is still the fountainhead of art."[37] Frankenthaler retained the mythical within her work through allusion and allegory. *Wizard* is a rare direct reference to the mythological, an image captured and enclosed as the unavoidable center of discussion in the piece.

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[37] Bernstock, 169.

CONCLUSION

Wizard was undoubtedly a key piece in the development of Frankenthaler's early 1960s art practice. The painting depicts a change in composition that the artist ultimately decided was best undertaken in a new medium, yet *Wizard* is the one known painting in oil, from the summer when the artist permanently changed to the use of acrylic paint, suggesting an important moment of transition began with this work. *Wizard* neatly highlights the main developments in Frankenthaler's 1963 work in one piece. It questions Frankenthaler's previously held artistic tenets relating to form, material, composition, and issues of spontaneity and intent. It fits neatly at the start of a collection of works she undertook that summer. These works featured myriad new approaches: covering virtually the entire canvas in paint, intentionally centering an "enveloped" image, and using obvious strokes of guided paint rather than the unguided drips and blots of her earlier oeuvre. All of these paintings were flipped so that the reverse was shown as the final work.

Frankenthaler remained committed to the flatness of her work, demonstrated by the flipping of these summer 1963 paintings. But *Wizard's* enveloping content is again breaking new ground. Here, for the first time we see something that could reasonably be construed as intended content in Frankenthaler's work. Centering this enchanted-like form allowed the viewer to see that image as the subject of the painting. Frankenthaler encouraged this idea of intended content by clearly naming the painting for the

amorphous image. Her choice of title implied *Wizard's* composition was driven by imagination and intent. Ultimately, *Wizard's* importance and fascination lie in its position as a painting that must have challenged Frankenthaler's artistic beliefs and practices as she entered the second decade of her professional artistic career.

Although *Wizard* sits comfortably in a compositional context with Frankenthaler's other paintings from that summer and the following year, it is a challenging anomaly in terms of medium and size. The size of the piece suggests it was cropped to allow one compositional element to dominate the work, as does the centering of the image. It further suggests the work may have been an experiment in a new direction, kept by the artist because she saw something successful in what she painted. The overworking in areas, and clearly guided shaping in the top right corner, further contend an intentionality Frankenthaler preferred to deny when discussing her art practice. On these merits alone, *Wizard* becomes a painting of note in the artist's career.

Finally, *Wizard* demonstrates a relationship between the formal concerns of Frankenthaler's earlier paintings and her new reference to enclosure, evolving around 1962 in early prints and likely supported by the equally innovative work of Robert Motherwell, her then husband. Here, for the first time we see something that could reasonably be construed as intended content in Frankenthaler's work. Centering this enchanted-like form allowed the viewer to see that image as the subject of the painting. Frankenthaler encouraged this idea of intended content by clearly naming the painting for the amorphous image. Her choice of title implied *Wizard's* composition was driven by imagination and intent. Ultimately, *Wizard's* importance and fascination lie in its position

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